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Topic of Research: Conversing History: A Study of Select Folk Traditions of Southist Christians

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FINDINGS

Southist Christians, more generally known as Knanaya Christians, is a sub-community of St. Thomas Syrian Christians in Kerala who believe that their ancestry can be traced back to a premodern migration of a group of Syriac-speaking Christians from the Mesopotamian or Persian regions to Malabar (which is geographically present-day Kerala) under the leadership of a merchant leader names Knai Thomma. The community is presently organized under the ecclesiastical organizations of the Knanaya Catholic Church which is an independent eparchy under the Roman Catholic See and the Knanaya Jacobite Church which is a diocese under the Syrian Orthodox See of Antioch and comprises over 3.5 lakh individuals across the globe. Over the centuries, Southist Christians have maintained their ethnic distinction from the larger collective of St. Thomas Syrian Christians through culturally specific folk practices and the social practice of endogamy. Although scholarly attention has been paid attention to the St. Thomas Syrian Christians in general, sufficient attention has not been paid to the culture and traditions of Southist Christians. It is this lacuna that the present research work addresses by centering Southist Christian folklore as its object of study. Through a study of the content and transmission of Southist Christian folklore, which includes folk songs, legends, folk dance, and previously unrecorded microgenres such as proverbs, superstitions, etc. the findings of this research work understand the seminal location of folklore in sustaining community till date. The study also argues that the folklore of the Southists carries out the following functions amongst the folk: as repositories of a collective memory; as devotedly followed socio-cultural mechanisms of forging and sustaining a distinct folk consciousness; as important sources of biblical knowledge and as sources of historical and social legitimation for the folk community's claims of ethnocultural distinction from the general populous of the St. Thomas Syrian Christians in Kerala, particularly since the twentieth century.

The findings of this study also include the understanding of the history of folklore consolidation and dissemination undertaken by the community, particularly in the twentieth century is an important moment of postcolonial response to the social and economic restructurings of colonial modernity in Kerala. Through a close analysis of the history of textualization of the folk songs of the Southist Christian community, this study also takes cognizance of modern media technologies such as the digital space becoming a site of folklore emergence making Southist folklore as much a phenomenon of the past as well as

that of the present. For the same, a close analysis of the official website of the Southist Catholic church titled Knanayology where Southist folklore is digitally archived, and catalogued as well as the recently proliferating digital folklorisms related to Southist culture is undertaken.

A further important finding of this study is the positioning of the Southist Syrian Christian folklore as living domains of indigenous forms of collective memory which may be considered as an alternate historical language itself, thereby provincializing the universalizing narrative of western historicism. Through such an understanding, the study also positions Southist folklore as living enclaves of the premodern Christian Margam; Christian Margam refers to the specific way in which Christianity spread and grew in Malabar in the early years of the Christian era, especially in the context of maritime trade.

On the whole, this study analyses the heterogenous functions of folklore within the Southist Christian community and also connects these understandings to the disciplinary questions associated with history writing and folkloristics.